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ABSTRACT

The paper examines culture as an influential variable in the shaping of the value system within the sturcture of black families specifically those with mentally retarded members. Typical negative views of the black culture included such characteristics as matriarchal, unstable, and pathological. More recent views have focused on strengths, including strong kinship bonds, strong work orientation, and adaptability of family roles. Two strengths, the extended family or kinship network and the religious orientation, are examined in an analysis of how black families cope with retardation. Ethnographic studies focusing on child-rearing practices associated with black families of mentally retarded persons are reviewed, and results point to identifiable structural characteristics, including the role of the mother and support of the grandparents as essential elements of the social support network and the importance of the church as a source of respite care and mainstreamed experiences. (CL)

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WORKING WITH BLACK FAMILIES HAVING MENTALLY RETARDED MEMBERS

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Introduction

The quality of the lives of Black mentally retarded children is a new area of research. Empirical knowledge concerning how the Black family provides child care, handles financial matters, and conducts the ordinary daily responsibilities of a home with a mentally retarded child is virtually non-existent. There is evidence, however, that the structure of the Black family, in general, does not differ from the Black family having mentally retarded members (Mitchel-Kernan & Tucker, 1984).

The purpose of this paper is to examine culture as an influential variable in the shaping of the value system within the Black family structure. Emphasis will be placed upon the cultural foundations of the Black family that have determined the cohesive interactional patterns and adaptation skills necessary for survival in the mainstream society. Lastly, the family structure of the Black family having mentally retarded members will be discussed.

Cultural Foundations of the Black Family

Culture is defined as the rules used by members of a particular group to govern the interaction with each other and the environment. Berry (1976) sees culture as a way of life or a learned pattern of behavior which is unique to a group of people. On an individual level, some scholars have argued that culre, intertwined with language, programs the mind so that each person as a learner is both bounded and shaped

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according to the world-and-life view and the mental process styles of his culture (Ward, 1973).

The general view of the Black culture, as depicted by early investigators in the 1940's, has consisted of negative stereotypes (Myrdal, 1944). Some of these negative characteristics ascribed to the Black family were: (1) matriarchal, (2) unstable, (3) lacking in productivity, (4) multi-agency families, (5) low value of education, and (6) pathological. Since that time minority researchers, such as Billingsley (1968) and Hill (1972) have presented a different view of Black families, which focus on their strengths. According to Hill, these strengths are: (1) strong kinship bonds, (2) strong work orientation, (3) adaptability of family roles, (4) high achievement orientation, and (5) strong religious orientation. The basis for this shift in ideology may be attributed to a changing social order and the need of professionals and educators, alike, to develop a constructive understanding of how to increase minority parent involvement in the schools.

Two of these strengths, (1) the extended family or kinship network, and (2) the religious orientation of the Black family provides the substantive knowledge needed to understand how they cope with the handicap of mental retardation. The former strength, the extended family, is a primary source of familial support (McAdoo, 1978). The latter strength of religious orientation is an important contributor in the socialization process. The "church" represents an educational institution that adheres to social norms and provides the opportunity to develop non-kinship relationships. This is an important source for nurturing friendships between Black mentally retarded persons and their non-handicapped peers.

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The Role of the Extended Family

The kinship network in the Black family is a multigenerational social network of relatives, friends, and neighbors (Martin & Martin, 1978). Although there are no definite boundaries that characterize each family member, the extended family system is a support mechanism that functions in similar ways to the nuclear family. Through the network of cooperative kinship, Black family members are able to receive emotional, psychological, physical, and financial support. The extended family also serves to reinforce career aspirations of its members and to offer encouragement during an economic crisis, unemployment, illness, and other undesirable circumstances.

Another important feature of the extended Black family is the role of the mother. This type of family is referred to as matriarchal or maternal. Past studies have associated a female headed household as a source of family disorganization (Frazier, 1939). However, the current literature provides evidence that the presence of a strong maternal figure constitutes a significant source for establishing personal and professional goals, encouraging scholastic achievement, and transmitting educational ambitions to their Black children (Hale, 1982).

The Religious Orientation of the Black Family

The degree of participation of the Black family in the church culture is extensive. As a social institution, the church provides the opportunity for Black children to develop social competencies and friendships with their peers and Black adults to develop leadership skills and expertise in voluntary organizations. Thus, the church is a formal community structure that allows the Black family to practice one's religious beliefs and attain appropriate social skills for the larger society.

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The church is also a valuable resource for developing talents in drama, speaking, music, dance, etc. The extra-curricular activities offered by the church, in many cases, supplement the school's academic curriculum. The social structure of the church can be viewed as an educational institution through which Black children can achieve recognition and success outside of the school (Perkins, 1975).

Black Families Having Mentally Retarded Members

To determine the structural variables, e.g., child-rearing practices associated with the Black family, ethnographic studies employing naturalistic observations and interviews have been conducted with Black mentally retarded adults. As children, these mentally retarded adults were labelled educable mentally retarded (EMR) and diagnosed as having learning and behavioral problems similar to the six-hour retarded child. This label implies that the condition of mental retardation occurs during the school hours of 9 am to 3 pm and results solely from poor academic achievement in the classroom. In the community, the six-hour retarded child has adequate adaptive behavior skills and loses any distinctive characteristics assigned by teachers and administrators in the public school system (Mercer, 1973).

Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan (1983) studied the social support and social network of 24 Black mentally retarded adults, 12 females, whose mean age was 26.5 and 12 males, whose mean age was 26.8. The IQ scores of the study sample ranged from 55 to 70. Living arrangements of the sample consisted of (a) the family of origin, (b) a care facility, and (c) an independent living situation.

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As previously noted, the procedures used in data collection qualitative methods employed in cultural anthropology and social psychology. In addition, the subjects were administered structured questionaires and standardized instruments. From the questionaire responses, the following categories emerged: (1) the structural characteristics of the sample's social networks (e.g., dominant source and intimate and critical ties); (2) coping mechanisms in problem solving situations, (3) the underlying reasons for the transactions among family and kinship ties, and (4) the qualitative aspects of specific social relationships.

Overall, the results revealed that the Black mentally retarded adults conducted their lives in the same way as their non-handicapped peers and/or role models. These adults were involved in romantic relationships, had children, developed close relationships, and identified the family as a dominant source in their social network.

The role of the family emerged as an important source of emotional, psychological, and financial support. The composition of the extended family network was matriarchal with a cluster of adult females plus lineal relatives, such as aunts, uncles, in-laws, and cousins. This outcome confirmed the hypothesis that the structural variables in the Black family are not distinguishable in nature from the Black family having mentally retarded members.

The data revealed that familial involvement consisted of a range of services under the following categories: (1) life management, (2) housekeeping, (3) child care, and (4) guidance and direction. Under the first category of life management, the subjects experienced difficulty in tasks that necessitated reading and/or math skills. For example, the cashing of checks, the comple-

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tion of job applications, the selection of food in a restaurant the writing of letters, and the passing of exams, e.g., driver's license and civil service tests. In these circumstances, relatives, and kinship members, rather than friends were instrumental in fulfilling their daily needs. In prioritizing the needs of Black mentally retarded adults, financial assistance was a major concern. In several cases, 21 out of 24 sample subjects, a family member was responsible for maintaining the fiscal management of monies received from the social service agencies. For example:

> Helen lived in a board and care facility in which she had no control over her financial affairs. Her mother is the payee for Helen's Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and makes payments directly to the board and care operator. The remaining amount is used by Helen's mother to purchase articles that she believes that Helen needs. Although Helen is quite discontent with this arrangement, her history of psychiatric problems and epileptic seizures causes her mother to doubt Helen's ability to manage her own affairs independently ....(Kernan and Tucker, p. 179).

The second category of housekeeping was an important function of family members. Although Black mentally retarded females were more skilled in performing household chores, such as cleaning, cooking, and washing, the family of origin provided regular assistance to oversee the completion of these activities.

The third category, child care, was another significant area of family responsibility. Grandparents provided a range of child-rearing services from parenting to babysitting to feeding to educating young children. The degree of participation or family support involved the total removal of the child from the custody of the real parents to the temporary placement of the baby with the parents of the Black mentally retarded mother.

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In using self-report as a specific data collection procedure, the following observations were made:

> Carolyn, who is divorced, recieves considerable support from her mother in the care and rearing of her three children through the provision of a home, money, discipline, and a number of other daily child care needs. Indeed, her mother's high level of involvement appears to be a central factor in her mother's decision to move back to their home state when it becomes financial feasible. It is there, that Carolyn's mother expects to find sufficient support from her own kin group to make Carolyn's dependence less of a burden....(Kernan & Tucker p. 180).

Matriarchial support in the extended family network is also illustrated through the following example:

> Although Mitchell, a 24-year old male, had relatively little involvement with his family, this situation changed radically after his marriage and subsequent birth of his child. Because Mitchell's mother disapproves of his wife, who is also retarded, this increased frequency of kin interaction tends to take place between Mitchell and his in-laws rather than his own relatives. His mother's disengagement, however, is more than compensated for by he mother-in-law's involvement in his life. She invited the new couple to live with her and provides a wide variety of support for them and their baby....(Kernan & Tucker, p. 180).

These findings suggest that the role of the grandmother is extremely important/significant. This extended family arrangement has been identified as an informal adoption procedure whereby the grandparents assumed the child care responsibilities due to the mentally retarded's parental incapacity, marital problems, immaturity, and the grandparent's own self-fulfilling need of companionship. In addition, these conclusions concur with the previous writings of Hill and Shackleford (1975) and Nobles (1974) to suggest that this type of extended family structure is a distinctive feature of Black families.

In the last category of guidance and direction, the reliance of Black mentally retarded subjects to discuss personal problems.

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feelings, lonliness and social-affective needs was an obvious characteristic. The sample subjects referred to their parents, in-laws, and siblings as friends. A case in good point was made by this subject:

> According to Steve, age 22, he would run to his mother in a minute. He stated that he would drop like that to run to her...We talk. We don't have that kind of communication as far as hanging around together. But we talk whenever I need somebody to talk to....(Kernan & Tucker, p. 181).

In summary, there were several identifiable structural characteristics of the Black family having mentally retarded members. The extended family, in particular, the role of the mother and support of the grandparents are essential elements in the social support network. The extent of the involvement and degree of interaction is determined by two factors: the fiscal management of income and the socialization of young children. Although housekeeping and guidance from the extended family are not as important, Black mentally retarded adults are highly dependent upon their extended family to assist in these areas.

Earlier in this paper, the religious orientation of the Black family was discussed as an important formal support service in developing friendships. The research findings of this study indicate that the church is the most central agency among voluntary organizations where friendships can be nurtured. The church has been instrumental in their attempts to (1) assimilate the Black mentally retarded individual into the mainstream of society, (2) teach occupational skills, and (3) provide services for their special needs. Thus, it appears that the church may be viewed as an important source through which respite care and other

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services may be attained. There needs to be more substantive empirical evidence to document the type of services provided, who is entitled to these services, the frequency of participation by mentally retarded individuals, and the effectiveness (cost and treatment) of these services.